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## ABSTRACT

This paper identifies differences in educational outcomes for rural students in South Australia compared to their metropolitan peers. This information was compiled by a task force whose aim was to develop an action plan to achieve equality of educational opportunities for rural students. Available information suggests that students in country schools generally do less well than their metropolitan peers or than the student population as a whole. Teachers, parents, and students cite restricted access to educational and other services as the major detriment experienced by students in country schools. In addition, rural students spend less time studying languages other than English, music, drama, or dance, and more time studying agriculture, computing/keyboarding, health, or home economics, when compared to students in metropolitan schools. Other findings include: marked differences in curriculum provision between country and metropolitan secondary schools; discrepancies in dropout rates of students living in the country when compared to metropolitan students; rural-urban differences in achievement scores in math, physics, and chemistry; and lower participation rates of rural students in postsecondary education and training. These findings represent preliminary information, and more research is needed concerning participation, achievement, and retention to provide a basis for informed decision making. Additional rural issues that were raised by principals, teachers, and support staff include staffing, interagency support, and changing employment opportunities. (LP)

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## NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN COUNTRY SCHOOLS: A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

David Craig — Australia

### ABSTRACT

The paper raises questions for students in country areas in relation to participation, retention, achievement and post school options. The intention of the paper is to provide information and direction for further action and debate at a school and systems level. Some key questions that will be addressed are:

- What is the nature of the educational disadvantage confronting students in the country?
- What are the unacceptable differences in the educational outcomes of students in country schools?
- What social and economic issues are emerging which impact on student participation and achievement?
- What can be done to address the educational disadvantage experienced by country students?

The paper was developed as a basis for consultation with school based staff, educational support services and parents. Results of the consultation will inform priorities and strategies for an action plan for country students in South Australia. The consultation process was completed in April and the responses analysed in June.

This paper is intended to provide insights into the nature of the educational disadvantage experienced by country students. In doing so it highlights the difficulties many country students experience in accessing and participating in a broad balanced curriculum and the curriculum reform which is necessary to address this exclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1993 a task group was convened to develop an action plan as directed by objective 3 of the South Australian Education Department's Three Year Plan which is "To achieve equality of opportunity and social justice for students". The task group who contributed to the writing of this paper were

|                                 |                                                |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Kate Bajzik                     | Aboriginal Education                           |
| Margaret Beagley                | Open Access College                            |
| Barry Buderick                  | Eastern Area School                            |
| David Craig (executive officer) | Curriculum Division                            |
| Graham Davis                    | Western Area                                   |
| Jennifer Emery                  | Curriculum Division                            |
| Mary Mansell                    | Country Areas Program State Advisory Committee |
| Peter Muller                    | Penola High School                             |
| Judi Quinn                      | Ceduna Area School                             |
| Susan Sweetman (convenor)       | Curriculum Division                            |

The task group agreed that the process for developing an action plan should comprise three elements:

- preparing and distributing information about the educational experience of students living in the country as well as information about system support directed to country schooling
- consulting with teachers, students, school councils, parent and community groups about priorities and strategies for an action plan for students living in the country
- developing an action plan for distribution to schools and divisions in 1995.

This paper represents achievement of the first step in the process of developing an action plan.

While this paper focuses on identifying the differences in educational outcomes for students in country schools compared with their metropolitan peers, it is important to keep in mind the considerable benefits of living in the country and attending the local school.

Perhaps the most problematic complication is that there is no shared understanding of precisely what the unacceptable differences in outcomes are for country students. Very little information is available from researchers or from educational monitoring which enable judgements to be made about if and how students in the country benefit less from schooling compared with their metropolitan peers.

This paper marks a starting point in understanding educational disadvantage as it relates to students in country schools. The task

group is of the view that monitoring educational outcomes and research into related issues must be incorporated into an action plan so that future planning is based on a comprehensive information base.

## EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS IN COUNTRY SCHOOLS

It appears from the information available that generally students in country schools do less well than their metropolitan peers or than the student population as a whole. Preliminary information suggests the differences in achievement and post school education are significant. South Australian participation data currently confined to subject enrolment in years 11 and 12 suggests substantial differences in some subjects and similarities in others.

The task group, in presenting information about educational outcomes of country students recognises the positive aspects of living in and attending schools in the country. When asked students, parents and teachers readily identify a number of factors which contribute to an enhanced quality of life characteristic of living in the country. An investigation (unpublished) of the barriers to and facilitators of student participation and retention to year 12 in Country Areas Program (remote and isolated) schools reports the benefits of country schools as perceived by parents, students and teachers.

- smaller schools and in many cases smaller classes contribute to supportive educational and social relationships between students and between teachers and students
- teachers are often part of the local community participating in the town's recreational and service groups
- parents have a strong commitment and sense of responsibility for the school which is often evidenced in fund raising activities and grounds development
- parents will often identify safety and lots of space as important for children growing up

## EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

In South Australia students identified as educationally disadvantaged are those whose educational outcomes compare unfavourably with the student population as a whole. The benefits of schooling are usually described in terms of students' achievement in the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) and their post school destinations particularly employment and/or tertiary study. Indicators of the benefits of schooling are generally accepted as attendance, participation and retention. That is, if students have very low absence rates, actively engage in the required areas of study and complete a full secondary education (usually equated with completing the SACE) they are more likely to be successful and have more options for further study, training or employment.

Equal opportunity legislation and Education Department policies identify the following groups as disadvantaged;

- girls
- students from non English speaking backgrounds
- Aboriginal students
- students with disabilities
- students living in poverty

In recent years students living in geographically remote areas have also been identified. However, this has been done without any real examination of what disadvantage means for these students. There has also been confusion about the group to whom the disadvantage refers, ie is it all country students or only those in geographically isolated and remote areas?

- Educational disadvantage for country students has traditionally been described in terms of provision or lack of it rather than outcomes. Teachers, parents and students cite restricted access to educational and other services as the major detriment experienced

by students in country schools. The more remote and isolated schools and students are, the less opportunity they have to access social, cultural and educational activities available to students in the metropolitan area.

Some information about achievement and the indicators of educational success is available about country students as a group. However, until state wide information systems and plans for monitoring student achievement are implemented and data collected and analysed by group and gender, information about who benefits and does not benefit from schooling is unavailable at a system level.

The next section of this paper describes information available about students in country schools in relation to participation, retention and achievement compared with their metropolitan counterparts. Much of the information has been drawn from small scale investigations and local studies funded by the Country Areas Program.

## PARTICIPATION

For the purposes of this paper participation refers to student enrolment in the required areas of learning. The sources of information at a state level are limited to an unpublished report from the Junior Secondary Review and Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) reports on SACE enrolments. Currently system wide data is not collected on participation in the primary years of schooling, however, the issues emerging from reports on participation in secondary schooling have implications for the early years of schooling.

As part of the Junior Secondary Review information was collected about curriculum offered and time allocated to subjects in schools with a secondary enrolment. Data for students attending Area schools was extracted in order to see whether any trends were apparent in relation to curriculum provision for students in country schools.

The significant differences between the subject emphases of Area schools compared to all schools are illustrated in the following table. Students in Area schools spend less time studying languages other than English (LOTE), music, drama, dance and more time studying agriculture, computing/keyboards, health and home economics compared with students in all schools.

Table 1: Average time spent on subjects in Area schools compared with all schools

| Subject              | Percentage of time |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| LOTE                 | 40%                |
| Music                | 33%                |
| Drama/dance          | 32%                |
| Agricultural studies | 223%               |
| Computing/keyboards  | 221%               |
| Health               | 172%               |
| Home economics       | 125%               |

Source: Junior Secondary Review, Interim Project Group 1991

Information from SSABSA about country students subject enrolment supports the findings of the Junior Secondary Review. At year 12 there are also marked differences between country and metropolitan students' enrolment in publicly assessed and school assessed subjects. The table below shows that in 1992 approximately one third of students in the country were enrolled in PES compared with just over half of the metropolitan students.

Table 2: Total number of subject enrolments in Year 12 PES and SAS courses

|                       | PES*   | %     | SAS**  | %    |
|-----------------------|--------|-------|--------|------|
| Country students      | 7 863  | 35.7% | 14 141 | 64.3 |
| Metropolitan students | 25 603 | 55.6% | 20 454 | 44.4 |

Source: Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1992

\* PES refers to Publicly Examined Subjects

\*\* SAS refers to School Assessed Subjects

It appears there are marked differences in curriculum provision between country and metropolitan secondary schools. However further investigation is required before judgements can be made. Reasons for differences in timetabling practices, curriculum offerings and subject enrolments need to be investigated.

The establishment of the Open Access College had as its central purpose the provision of R-12 courses through distance education which allows all students, particularly those in rural and remote areas, access to the full range of curriculum.

Students are able to enrol with the Open Access College to take subjects not offered by the school. In theory this means students are not restricted in subject choice by the size of the school they attend. In practice it appears that responses to distance education vary. Information from Education Review Unit reports and from an investigation into factors influencing participation and retention in Country Areas Program schools suggests that the extent to which the potential of distance education is maximised is directly related to staff support.

In some schools negative attitudes of staff corresponded with student and parent resistance to enrolling in courses delivered by distance education. In others where appropriate facilities and management structures have been established and support is provided, parents, students and staff identified significant benefits for students. In addition to successful participation and completion of courses, students and parents reported appreciation of the wider curriculum choice available and increased student confidence and independence as a result of acquiring a range of new skills and abilities. Students identified connections between these skills and their future education and employment opportunities.

While there is no doubt room for improvement in distance education delivery, particularly the technology used and the skills of delivery teachers, the information available indicates that action is required in some schools to ensure students benefit from this method of participating in the curriculum. Currently distance education is used predominantly by students in senior secondary. However increasing numbers of primary school students are enrolling in LOTE through the Open Access College.

## RETENTION

At a system level the apparent retention rates are calculated for the state by comparing the number of students at year 12 with the number of year 8 students five years previously. While schools have the capacity to track individual student's retention and are thereby able to calculate real retention rates, there is no mechanism at a system level to do this. This method produces retention data which is relatively accurate for the total student population. However it is considerably less useful for looking at retention rates for groups of schools or groups of students. The method takes no account of student transfers between schools nor of re-entry students.

**Table 3: Apparent retention rates to year 12 in South Australian government schools in 1992**

|              | Boys | Girls | Total |
|--------------|------|-------|-------|
| Metropolitan | 97.7 | 103.2 | 100.4 |
| Country      | 61.8 | 66.7  | 64.2  |
| Total        | 84.8 | 90.1  | 87.3  |

*Source: Information Management Unit, Education Department.*

The retention to year 12 of students living in the country appears significantly lower than for students in the metropolitan area. However it must be kept in mind that a number of students living in the country leave the local school to complete their education in a metropolitan school or a school in a regional centre. If there was the capacity to collect information using home location rather than school location the differences may not be as great. What these figures do show is that significant numbers of students in the country leave their local schools before completing Year 12. Presumably a reasonable proportion complete their schooling elsewhere.

When comparing figures for metropolitan and country school leavers provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991) census, it appears the school leaving rate is higher for metropolitan students; 11% of metropolitan students left school at age 15 years compared with 9.7% of country students.

Clearly further work is required before we have an accurate picture of retention in country schools and the reasons for students leaving their local schools.

A small scale investigation funded by the Country Areas Program (CAP) which targets remote and isolated schools looked at retention of students in a group of schools on the west coast of Eyre Peninsula. (Girls in Rural Schooling, Education Department 1993). The report claims that students from small primary schools who attend Area schools to complete their secondary education have lower retention rates than students who complete their primary schooling at an Area school.

For these students the retention rates in the period 1980 to 1990, were consistently less than 50%. It appears that retention to year 12 for students from small, remote schools is a significant issue. The report suggests that matters relating to transition, induction, travel and living away from home require further investigation.

Another study (unpublished) undertaken in six schools in the Murray Mallee region of the state asked students who had recently left school, their perceptions of what schooling in the country needs to offer students in order to prepare them for further study and/or work. This group of school leavers identified a number of areas for action including:

- improve access to information and resources, and the opportunity to work independently with support when needed
- provide better environments for academic excellence
- improve information about up to date career options and guidance in choice of subjects to fulfil these career options
- improve access to a wide range of subjects, whether it be through distance education or face to face teaching
- appoint good teachers, teachers are an important part of a student's life
- encourage and expect students to continue their education after leaving school.

The task group considers some of the areas for action identified above are worth further investigation. In particular the provision of better environments for academic excellence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some schools, both metropolitan and country it is accepted that students do not strive to be successful and that the peer group actively works against student retention to year 12 and successful completion of SACE.

The Country Areas Program investigation into factors assisting and inhibiting student participation and retention in country schools reports that some teachers and parents described their school as having a culture of mediocrity.

Further investigation is required particularly into the roles that school staffs, parents and students have in maintaining or changing such a culture.

Questions that arise from this information are:

What factors contribute to students moving from country schools to complete their secondary education?

What impact does the exodus at years 8, 10, and 11 have on the students remaining in the local school?

How wide spread is the culture of mediocrity and what action can be taken by school communities to address it?

## ACHIEVEMENT

Until the plan for monitoring student achievement is implemented data available at a system level on student achievement is restricted to reports from SSABSA on students' achievement in stage 1 and 2 of the SACE.

For most subjects in SACE stage 2 there is little difference in achievement between country and metropolitan students. However there are some differences which the following tables demonstrate.

**Table 4: SACE Stage 2 Maths I, Maths II, Physics and Chemistry**

| Subject   | Metropolitan |           |            |           | Country    |           |            |           |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
|           | Male         |           | Female     |           | Male       |           | Female     |           |
|           | Mean Score   | Enrolment | Mean Score | Enrolment | Mean Score | Enrolment | Mean Score | Enrolment |
| Maths I   | 13.4         | 1375      | 13.9       | 647       | 11.8       | 305       | 12.6       | 144       |
| Maths II  | 13.3         | 1359      | 14.1       | 641       | 11.6       | 304       | 12.5       | 143       |
| Physics   | 12.8         | 2301      | 13.3       | 1075      | 11.0       | 529       | 12.0       | 246       |
| Chemistry | 13.0         | 1718      | 13.1       | 1113      | 11.3       | 416       | 11.7       | 289       |

Source: Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1992

Mean Score refers to the average subject achievement score.

Girls achievement in each of the maths and science subjects is higher than that of boys, however the enrolments of girls in those subjects is about half that of boys. Boys in country schools do less well than boys and girls in metropolitan schools. The difference in achievement between girls and boys in country schools is less marked.

Further information is required to provide a comprehensive picture of students aspirations and post school destinations. It can probably be assumed that fewer girls choose maths and science subjects for reasons based on stereotypes of girls capabilities and aspirations. This information has implications for subject counsellors in senior secondary, maths and science teaching and career education courses across the R-12 range.

Other information obtained from the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1992 indicated a higher participation and achievement rates in gender stereotyped course options. This was particularly noticeable for boys in automotive maintenance and furniture construction.

To what extent do students' subject choices reflect their post school aspirations?

What strategies can be implemented to broaden girls and boys subject choices?

## POST SCHOOL DESTINATIONS

The decline in the rural economy has had a significant impact on country students post school options. Opportunities for employment for both girls and boys on farms and local businesses and service industries are no longer guaranteed.

The National Board of Employment Education and Training (1991) reported low participation rates of country students in further education and training and identified it as a major concern.

**Table 5: Participation in TAFE and Higher Education by age group for South Australia (% of relevant age cohort)**

| Age      | TAFE         |                  | Higher education |                  |
|----------|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|          | Metropolitan | Non metropolitan | Metropolitan     | Non metropolitan |
| 15 to 19 | 12.1         | 10.7             | 10.5             | 0.8              |
| 20 to 24 | 10.7         | 2.9              | 13.7             | 0.9              |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1989

\* This table does not necessarily represent the origins of the students (metropolitan/non-metropolitan) it might only represent their current location while studying.

Further information is required from young people in the country about what assists and inhibits their participation in further education and training. The study, *Girls in Rural Schooling* found that the percentage of girls taking up further education or training as a post school option after completing year 12 is the same whether schooling was completed at the local Area school or at a school in a regional centre. However, girls who completed their education locally tended to select a narrower choice of post school

In maths and science subjects enrolment and attainment are generally lower for students in country schools. The following table shows mean scores in SACE stage 2 subjects in 1992.

options. This study also revealed that out of a cohort of 44 Aboriginal girls, in the year after leaving school only 14 (34%) were employed or participating in some form of further education and training.

The following table provides information on 1992 Year 12 students in government schools who applied, were given an offer, enrolled or deferred in 1993 courses at a higher educational institution. As a guide to interpreting this data, in 1992 28.8% of year 12 students were enrolled in country government schools and 71.2% in metropolitan government schools.

**Table 6: SATAC applications, offers, enrolments and deferments 1992 for 1993**

|              | Applications |     | Offers |       | Enrolments |       | Deferments |       |
|--------------|--------------|-----|--------|-------|------------|-------|------------|-------|
| Country      | 1937         | 24% | 1009   | 24.3% | 682        | 21.0% | 212        | 39.7% |
| Metropolitan | 6147         | 76% | 3139   | 75.7% | 2571       | 79.0% | 322        | 60.3% |

Source: South Australian Tertiary Admission Centre Sixteenth Annual Report to 30 June, 1993

In 1993, 16.7% of students in country government schools enrolled in a higher education institution compared with 23.5% in metropolitan government schools.

Information from the ABS (1991) indicates that in South Australia 13% of metropolitan 15 to 25 year olds who are not in the workforce are unemployed compared with 20% in the country. It appears that employment opportunities for young people living in country areas are more restricted.

Clearly more information is needed about country girls and boys post school destinations.

To what extent are schools monitoring students participation in further education, training and employment?

What can be done at a school and system level to improve students opportunities for participating in higher education and training programs in country areas?

This brief overview of educational outcomes for country students raises more questions than it answers. Current initiatives for monitoring participation, achievement and retention will in future years provide the basis for more informed decision making. For the time being however, we must carefully consider the data available along with information about the experience of teachers, parents and students and make our best judgements about action to be taken to improve schooling for all students in country schools.

## EMERGING ISSUES

During the preparation of this information paper a number of issues were raised in conversations with principals, teachers and school support staff in Western and Eastern Areas. The task group invites response to the following issues, identification of additional issues and comment on their impact on teaching and learning in country schools.

### Staffing

As mentioned in the introduction country South Australia is diverse making generalisations about characteristics of schools and schooling in the country almost impossible. The staffing profile of country schools is often raised by teachers, principals and parents as an issue related to disadvantage.

Some schools in the country have relatively high staff turn over rates, a high proportion of teachers recently completing their training, a high proportion of contact teachers and difficulties employing temporary relieving teachers (TRT's). Management issues associated with these characteristics include induction programs, continuity of program development, school development planning and training and development.

However, there are country schools with very low staff turn over rates and training and development for teacher renewal is identified as a priority given the expectations of schools in relation to initiatives such as national statements and profiles, social justice and performance management. Teachers and principals and support staff also identify training and development as a priority for principals taking up their first appointment, teachers returning to work after relatively long periods of leave and teachers who have worked in small country schools for all or most of their careers.

While the above issues are not confined to country schools, the provision of training and development is complicated by costs and time required to travel to district based or centrally provided programs. Distance education technology has the potential to overcome the constraints of distance and requires further investigation and development.

### Changing Demography Of Country Towns

The task group has been unable to gather data about social stratification in country towns. However principals and school support personnel report that particular towns appear to be attracting increasing numbers of families and students who qualify for school card.

Over recent years relatively low cost housing has become available in these towns or on nearby farms and families are moving from the metropolitan or greater metropolitan area to take advantage of low rent, and an improved quality of life. In some towns new housing developments are being occupied by low income families. These changes impact on schools as the student population becomes more diverse. There are consequent issues for school staffs and school councils to address to ensure a cohesive school community and quality schooling for all students.

Over the last two or three years student transience has also been recognised as a significant issue. Anecdotal evidence suggests that

moving school more than once during a year has a significant impact on the educational outcomes of students. There are undoubtedly issues here for school management and organisation and for teachers' programming and planning to minimise the negative impact of transience on student participation and achievement.

### Interagency Support

Increasingly, schools in regional centres and larger country towns are finding they require departmental student services and the services of other agencies in their efforts to support students and their families. There are a number of difficulties associated with accessing support services. Most services are located in regional centres which in some cases are understaffed because positions can not be filled. Schools at some distance from regional centres often have to wait for scheduled visits from support personnel.

### Changing Employment Opportunities

The reduction of employment options in country towns and on farms has been occurring steadily over the past few years. The impact of these changes are reported in terms of students' and families feelings of anger, frustration and hopelessness as the traditional employment opportunities which for some students were guaranteed, no longer exist. Farms are sold, share farming is no longer viable, local businesses lay off staff or close altogether. There are implications for schools in relation to both supporting students as they come to grips with these changes and in the development of useful career counselling and work education programs.

To what extent are the social and economic issues identified above experienced across country areas and how are school communities responding?

What further issues are emerging which impact on country schools and how are schools responding?

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